

# MP3 PLAYERS

## INTRODUCTION

Life's better with an MP3 player. It can make commuting a pleasure or help you keep your pace at the gym. It even gives you an excuse to ignore friends and co-workers. No wonder two-thirds of *Computer Shopper* readers already have some form of digital music player.

The latest wave of players provides even more reasons to join the MP3 crowd or upgrade your existing kit. They're much smaller and more stylish than earlier products and are packed with extra features, from stopwatches to video players and digital radio tuners.

This month, we've tested 16 of the latest music players. Some can store your entire music collection, while others can play continuously for well over 24 hours, and one is completely waterproof. Whether you're after looks, features or perfect audio quality, we'll guide you to the ideal player for your money.

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# PREMIERSHIP PLAYERS

You'll never be bored with one of the latest feature-packed music players in your pocket. We treat our ears to sweet sounds from 16 top-flight devices

## Choosing an... MP3 Player

**T**here are hundreds of MP3 players available, with a bewildering range of features. Some can display photos and video, but players that do this well are not cheap. Storage space, battery life and sound quality all vary, as do the file formats they can play.

### LOST IN SPACE

If you have a large music collection and you want to carry it with you, you'll need a player with lots of space. If you're happy to carry a smaller selection of tracks, capacity is less of an issue and you can choose a less chunky player. 1GB can hold about 250 songs, and all but two of the players in this test have at least that.

MP3 players use either flash memory or a hard disk to store data. The three highest-capacity players in this test (12GB and above) use hard disks. Players of this sort tend to cost less per gigabyte and usually have more space than flash players. However, they are more susceptible to damage, as they have moving parts that may not stand up to being dropped or jogged about. Hard disk players have also been known to skip if you use them while exercising vigorously.

Most of the players in this test use flash memory for storage. This has no moving parts, so it can take a lot more abuse than a hard disk. However, flash memory is

expensive in large quantities, so 8GB is currently the highest-capacity player commonly found.

### PERFECT HARMONY

At full CD quality, a minute of music generally takes up about 10MB of space, which soon becomes impractical if you want to store an entire music collection. MP3 files are compressed to make them about 10 times smaller, with only a slight reduction in audio quality. Other popular audio file types such as WMA, AAC, and OGG achieve similar levels of compression.

All the players in this test support MP3 files, but if your music collection is in any other format, make sure you get a device capable of playing them. Our table on page 111 shows which formats each player supports.

If you've bought music online, it is probably copy-protected and impossible to convert to other formats. This makes it doubly important to get a music player that plays the original format. Music from the Apple iTunes store plays only on iPods, and files from the SonyConnect online store (now closed) play only on Sony players that support Connect. Most other online stores sell files in WMA-DRM format, which is supported by players that bear the Microsoft PlaysForSure logo, as well as many that don't. Some



| This month                           |          |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| <b>SANDISK Sansa Shaker</b>          | Page 106 |
| <b>MINISTRY OF SOUND MOSMP085X10</b> | Page 106 |
| <b>ALBA PRDAB210MP3</b>              | Page 106 |
| <b>CREATIVE Zen Stone Plus</b>       | Page 106 |
| <b>APPLE iPod Shuffle</b>            | Page 108 |
| <b>SWEEX Blue Bay 4GB</b>            | Page 108 |
| <b>SAMSUNG YP-T9</b>                 | Page 108 |
| <b>IRIVER S10-2GB</b>                | Page 108 |
| <b>SONY NW-A805 Walkman</b>          | Page 109 |
| <b>COWON iAudio7</b>                 | Page 109 |
| <b>SANDISK Sansa e280</b>            | Page 109 |
| <b>FINIS SwiMP3</b>                  | Page 109 |
| <b>ARCHOS 204</b>                    | Page 110 |
| <b>APPLE iPod Nano</b>               | Page 110 |
| <b>TREKSTOR VibeZ</b>                | Page 110 |
| <b>APPLE iPod</b>                    | Page 110 |

stores allow you to download and play unlimited music for a monthly subscription, but your right to play the songs you've downloaded expires if your subscription lapses.

If you want to listen to audio books, you may be interested in players that support the Audible digital audiobook format. However, audio books are also available in other formats such as WMA.

FREE TRANSFER

Many players come with custom software for transferring music to them, but most also appear as USB or Media Transfer Protocol (MTP) devices in Windows Explorer. This means you can simply drag and drop your music files or, if you have an MTP-compatible player, use Windows Media Player to transfer tracks.

However, most Sony and all Apple players use their own software to copy music to your player. Apple's iPod and Sony's A805 come with installation discs, but you'll have to download iTunes if you buy an iPod Shuffle or Nano.

Where a player supports video, you must either seek out video files of the correct format and resolution or use software to re-encode your existing files, which can be time-consuming.

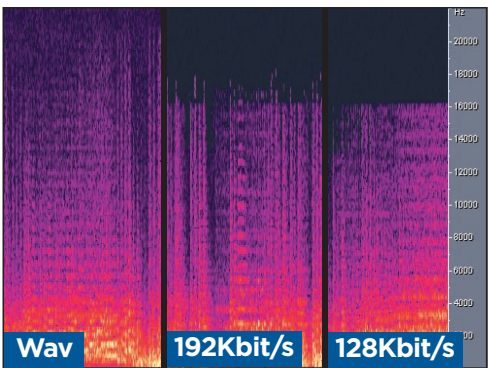
ASSAULT AND BATTERY

Three of the players in this test use standard AA or AAA batteries, while the others have rechargeable batteries. Battery life varied widely

Bits and pieces Compression effects explained

If you think you can settle for a lower-capacity MP3 player simply by compressing your music more, you need to consider the consequent reduction in audio quality. MP3 audio compression removes elements of the original audio signal, and while it strips out the least obvious frequencies, the quality is inevitably reduced. To compress music more you decrease the 'bit rate', from say 192Kbit/s to 128Kbit/s. This enables you to fit 50 per cent more files on your player, but you sacrifice more of the original data.

The spectrum analyser graphs here show the frequency content of a section of music, as an uncompressed file, then as 192Kbit/s and 128Kbit/s MP3 files. As you



can see, compression removes more and more of the higher frequencies, which results in a slight reduction in audio quality.

in our tests. We don't recommend buying a player that provides less than 10 hours of battery life. Almost all the players in this test surpassed that, and seven players exceeded 13 hours.

ALL CLEAR

Sound quality was generally impressive. Almost all the players sounded good at a comfortable volume and the default equaliser setting, with no

hiss or problems with variable bit rate MP3s. However, a couple of the players suffered from distortion when we used a bass-boosted setting.

Many players are let down by the quality of their headphones. Common problems are a lack of bass power and clarity. Some are uncomfortable to wear for any length of time. We've given each player's headphones a separate rating in the table on page 111.

## SANDISK Sansa Shaker

★★★★

£30 inc VAT

Sandisk's Sansa Shaker is a very basic MP3 player that runs on an AAA battery and stores music on an included 512MB SD card. It is aimed firmly at kids, and ours even came with a version of *The Wheels on the Bus* already on it.

The cylindrical player is designed to be easy to hold in your hand. It just about fits in a pocket, but is too large to be entirely comfortable.

To start playing music, you simply shake the player. You can change to a random track by shaking it while holding the play button. Twist controls at the top and bottom of the device change the volume and skip tracks. It's easy to use, although we were annoyed by the lack of a shuffle mode.

Our favourite feature is the extra headphone socket, which allows two people to listen at once. The volume decreased when we plugged in a second pair of headphones, but the sound quality didn't suffer. It comes with only one pair of headphones, but their audio quality is good. There's also an integrated speaker, which produces decent, if rather tinny, sound.

The included headphones are more comfortable than those with Sandisk's more expensive Sansa e280.

In our audio tests the Sansa Shaker produced powerful, low bass frequencies, but they were a bit fuzzy.

### VERDICT

The Sansa Shaker sounds pretty good and is fairly inexpensive. You can expand its capacity by replacing the existing SD card. It's robust and easy to use, but played for only nine hours, 54 minutes on an alkaline battery.



#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Two headphone sockets
- ✗ Bulky with poor battery life
- ✗ Basic features; no shuffle

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER  
512MB capacity (expandable),  
USB interface  
PART CODE SDMX9N-512B-A18  
SUPPLIER [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.sandisk.com](http://www.sandisk.com)

## MINISTRY OF SOUND MOSMP085X10

★

£40 inc VAT

This budget player looks good in principle. Its bright 2in screen can display both images and video, and it comes with decent ear-canal headphones.

It supports a range of audio formats, it can display and bookmark text files and even includes a microphone and speaker.

Sadly, the menu system is confusing, while the buttons are slow to respond and have too many different functions assigned to them.

The large screen would be ideal for video playback, but we had difficulty creating video files of the correct resolution with the poorly documented conversion utility. Many of the resulting videos used only a third of the player's screen and appeared to be in the wrong aspect ratio.

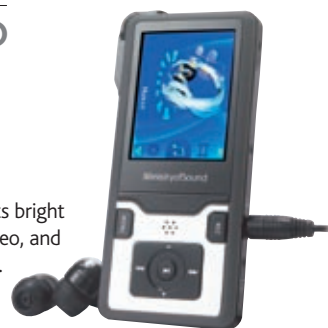
The player did badly in our battery life test, lasting just seven hours, 50 minutes. The titles of some of our tracks were garbled, too.

We also encountered problems with audio performance. The sound judders and pops when playing variable-bit rate MP3s. More seriously, a 192Kbit/s MP3 file with a normal playing time of three minutes, 37 seconds played in three minutes, 10 seconds. Strangely, there didn't seem to be any noticeable shift in pitch.

While a number of MP3 players allow you to play tracks at faster speeds, we couldn't persuade this one not to.

### VERDICT

Ministry of Sound's £40 video MP3 player could have been one of the best value products in this test, but it's let down by a litany of serious problems.



#### SUMMARY

- ✗ Plays files at the wrong speed
- ✗ Poor battery life
- ✗ Extremely frustrating interface

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 1GB  
capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE MOSMP085X10  
SUPPLIER [www.argos.co.uk](http://www.argos.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.ministryofsound.co.uk](http://www.ministryofsound.co.uk)

## ALBA PRDAB210MP3

★★★★★

£42 inc VAT



We were impressed by Alba's 1GB MP3 player and DAB radio. It's a long way from the style-conscious designs of many post-iPod players, but at £42 it's one of the most affordable players here.

It runs on normal AA batteries, and we were pleasantly surprised to find that it played for more than 25 hours on a single alkaline battery.

Audio is clear and distinct at all but the most painfully loud volumes. The equaliser isn't the best we've heard, but it can be effective, while its bass is equal to the iPod Shuffle's.

The menu system is more sophisticated than you'd expect on a basic player, and navigating through tracks and settings was easy. It supports playlists and can display tracks in a number of ways, including by artist and the date they were transferred to the player. It can behave as either a USB or Media Transfer Protocol (MTP) device, so you can transfer files using either Windows Media Player or an ordinary file manager.

The DAB – rather than FM – radio is unusual in a device at this price. We got good reception even in Shopper's basement labs.

The weak point of this player is the headphones. They are uncomfortable and lack bass.

### VERDICT

It may not be pretty, but this little player has good sound quality at a low price. Impressively, it's also the only player here to include a DAB radio.



#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Long battery life
- ✓ Built-in DAB radio
- ✗ Poor headphones

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 1GB  
capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE PRDAB210MP3  
SUPPLIER [www.argos.co.uk](http://www.argos.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.argos.co.uk](http://www.argos.co.uk)

## CREATIVE Zen Stone Plus

★★★★

£45 inc VAT

Earlier versions of Creative's rival to the iPod Shuffle were basic but cheap. This latest version, the Zen Stone Plus, costs more but is packed with extra features, including an FM radio, an integrated microphone and a tiny round LCD.

This screen displays track data and provides access to the menu system, which allows you to browse through your music archive, alter the mixer settings and access the player's extra functions. We found the menu system somewhat unintuitive, and the button layout makes it too easy to switch the radio on accidentally instead of pausing the current track.

The sound quality isn't quite as clear as the iPod Shuffle's, but there was no audible distortion even when we switched on the bass boost. Bass was generally quiet, with frequencies under 40Hz virtually inaudible, a problem that was exacerbated by the poor headphones.

The Zen Stone Plus didn't do well in our battery life tests. It managed less than seven hours of continuous playback, the worst performance here.

### VERDICT

The Zen Stone Plus does a lot for such a compact player, but in including so many features it no longer has the major advantage of its predecessor – a low price. It now competes head-on with the iPod Shuffle, and while it has twice the capacity of Apple's player, the Zen is let down by very poor battery life. Meanwhile, other players in the same price range offer many more features.



#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Decent audio quality
- ✗ Very poor battery life
- ✗ Lack of bass

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 2GB  
capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE 70PF219100115  
SUPPLIER [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)  
DETAILS [uk.europe.creative.com](http://uk.europe.creative.com)



## APPLE iPod Shuffle

★★★★★

£46 inc VAT



The iPod Shuffle is the smallest and least expensive of Apple's range of MP3 players. However, it has better audio quality than its larger siblings, with clear sound and plenty of bass and treble.

Simplicity is a large part of the Shuffle's appeal. It has two play modes: random and sequential. Both repeat until you switch the player off. You can skip tracks and change the volume, but there are no other controls.

You have to download iTunes before you can transfer music to the Shuffle. It has a modest 1GB capacity, but this is the smallest player of the group. A sturdy clip on its tough metal shell grips firmly on to clothing.

Unlike many basic MP3 players with a shuffle function, the Shuffle allows you to return to a previously played track, rather than forgetting what it has played. It played for more than 16 hours in our battery life test. This is longer than any of the other small rechargeable players, but still some way off the 25 hours that Alba's player achieved.

A lot of attention to detail has gone into the design. For example, the compact docking station plugs directly into the headphone socket, and the player automatically pauses itself when the headphones are unplugged. It's just a pity that the standard iPod headphones don't do justice to the quality of the Shuffle's sound.

### VERDICT

The iPod Shuffle looks and sounds good, and comes at a reasonable price. The necessity of using iTunes may put some off, but otherwise this is a great choice. It doesn't have the battery life of Alba's player, but it is a lot prettier.

#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Good audio quality
- ✓ Compact and attractive design
- ✗ Scant features and capacity

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE MA949ZT/A  
SUPPLIER [www.microdirect.co.uk](http://www.microdirect.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.apple.com/uk/](http://www.apple.com/uk/)

## SWEEX Blue Bay 4GB

★★★★★

£50 inc VAT



This 4GB version of Sweex's Blue Bay MP3 player offers a lot of space for a small, cheap drive. If you don't want to spend £50 on a basic MP3 player, the 2GB version is available for around £30.

While the Blue Bay may not be as eye-catching as Sweex's Pretty Pink MP3 player (*Labs, Shopper* February 2007), the design is similar. A mono LCD screen allows you to navigate your music. The scroll wheel acts as a select button when pressed, and can bring up various menus depending on how long you press it. We found this awkward to use. The player doesn't have a menu-based file browser, so you can skip tracks only one at a time.

The Blue Bay is powered by one AAA battery, and managed to play for 10 hours, 16 minutes on an alkaline battery. An integrated microphone enables this player to double as a voice recorder.

This version of the Blue Bay player comes with a pair of Sennheiser MX300 headphones (lower-capacity versions don't). The headphones are excellent, and both they and the player performed well in our bass and treble tests. Our only major complaints are that the Blue Bay plays tracks in filename order rather than track number order, and transferring 500MB of data took almost 15 minutes.

### VERDICT

The Blue Bay has a low price for such a high-capacity player, and sounds great. If you can put up with the fiddly interface and naming your audio files so that they play in the right order, this a good buy.

#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Good sound quality
- ✓ Inexpensive per gigabyte
- ✗ Menu system is difficult to use

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE MP036  
SUPPLIER [www.redstore.com](http://www.redstore.com)  
DETAILS [www.sweex.com](http://www.sweex.com)

## SAMSUNG YP-T9

★★★★★

£85 inc VAT



Samsung's beautifully designed YP-T9 is one of the most desirable players here, with gorgeous looks and an interface that is both attractive and easy to use.

Audio quality is excellent, with clear, undistorted sound across the spectrum at even the highest volumes. It has a huge number of EQ and 3D presets, plus a nine-band custom EQ that you can tweak to your heart's content.

Video playback is clear, bright, and very sharp, but files must be in Samsung's SVI format, and conversion with the Samsung Media Studio is rather slow. Video resizing was intelligent, though, and every test clip played at full screen on the player. Only one of our widescreen videos didn't have the correct aspect ratio after conversion.

Samsung's Media Studio software is easy to get to grips with, particularly if you've used iTunes. The player also behaves as an MTP device, so you can copy files to it with Windows Media Player or Explorer.

Samsung's headphones are not quite as good as the Sony Walkman's, but they're pretty good, although they sound a bit bright and lack bass. Battery life was great at over 26 hours.

### VERDICT

We were impressed by the quality of the audio and video from this stylish, easy-to-use player. It's a little expensive, but an excellent choice if you have the money. A 4GB version is available for £100.

#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent audio quality
- ✓ Good battery life
- ✗ Slightly expensive

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE YP-T9JBQB  
SUPPLIER [www.pixmania.com](http://www.pixmania.com)  
DETAILS [www.samsung.com](http://www.samsung.com)



## IRIVER S10-2GB

★★★

£89 inc VAT



The iRiver S10-2GB is one of the smallest players in this group, and the only tiny player with a full-colour screen.

This covers most of the player's face, and can be clicked in four directions to navigate the menu system. Volume and power controls are on the sides of the player, while other functions, such as deleting files and building playlists, require you to click and hold the directional controls. We found these a little over-sensitive and rather too easy to jog while the player is in your pocket.

Sound quality is generally good, except for a slight distortion of bass, even at normal volume and EQ settings.

The S10 handles a range of file types, but it plays tracks in alphabetical rather than track order. The transfer software also proved unstable, but we had no problem copying music to the player using Windows Explorer.

Unlike the iPod Shuffle, the S10 doesn't have a clip, but there is a loop for a lanyard. The headphones are attached to neck strap, which leaves the player dangling from your neck and ears. This isn't very comfortable, and while you can remove the strap, the headphone cable wasn't quite long enough to reach our trouser pockets.

### VERDICT

This player is reasonably easy to use and the colour screen and image-viewing features are nice, but they don't justify the S10's high price. We also expected a longer battery life.

#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Good quality colour screen
- ✗ Distorted bass tones
- ✗ Poor battery life

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE S10-2GB  
SUPPLIER [www.advancedmp3players.co.uk](http://www.advancedmp3players.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.iriver.com](http://www.iriver.com)

## SONY NW-A805 Walkman

★★★★★

£90 inc VAT

Sony's A805 Walkman won a Most Wanted award in *What's New, Shopper* August 2007 for its superior sound and attractive design. However, next to Samsung's similarly priced YP-T9 player, it looks less good value today.

Sound quality is excellent, and the five-band equaliser is simple to use, although we'd prefer finer control. MPEG4 playback on the detailed screen is flawless, and we had no problems with Sony's video conversion tool.

Most high-end MP3 players (other than the iPod) let you copy music to them via a file manager or Windows Media Player. While you can view the A805 as a USB device on your PC and copy video files to it with Windows Explorer, it doesn't recognise audio files transferred in this way.

The only way to get music on to the A805 is to use Sony's SonicStage software, which converts all music files to Sony's ATRAC format before transferring them. Annoyingly, even when we used SonicStage, we weren't able to copy files from the Walkman if they weren't already on our PC.

We were impressed by the A805's ear-canal headphones, which sound full-bodied and clear. The player also lasted well in our battery life test, with just over 23 hours of play time.

### VERDICT

The A805 sounds fantastic and comes with the best headphones in this test. Its battery life is a strong point, but if you want to use your MP3 player on multiple PCs, the SonicStage software is restrictive. An 8GB version, the NW-A808, is also available, but at around £170 it's expensive for its capacity.

### SUMMARY

- ✓ Fantastic headphones
- ✓ Excellent sound quality
- ✗ Restrictive music transfer

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE NW-A805/PC  
SUPPLIER [www.play.com](http://www.play.com)  
DETAILS [www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)



## COWON iAudio7

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

Cowon's iAudio7 may not be the most attractive MP3 player available, but it has some impressive features.

It was the clear winner of our battery life test, lasting just under 34 hours – more than six hours longer than Apple's iPod Nano. It supports a wide range of audio formats, and its sound quality is excellent. It lacks bass at the default settings, but it has plenty of EQ and audio processing controls.

This is the only player in this test with a dedicated line-in socket, and it offers a range of options to control the quality of your recording. It can also record audio from the integrated microphone or FM tuner.

The colour screen is grainier than some, but video is still watchable. The conversion tool is quick, although it didn't convert all formats to the correct size, and put an annoying Cowon logo in the corner of our videos.

We found little to fault the iAudio7. The touch-sensitive controls are a little too easy to trigger, and the fact that the record key doubles as a back button is worrying. Fortunately, you can adjust the sensitivity of the keys.

The headphones are disappointing, particularly with bass. They're not too uncomfortable, but they look a bit strange.

### VERDICT

The iAudio7 is inexpensive and offers incredible battery life. The controls take some getting used to, and it looks more functional than elegant, but this is a reliable, high-quality player. An 8GB version is available for £135.



### SUMMARY

- ✓ Clear sound
- ✓ Excellent battery life
- ✗ Disappointing bass

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE IAUDIOI74GB  
SUPPLIER [www.advancedmp3players.co.uk](http://www.advancedmp3players.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.cowonglobal.com](http://www.cowonglobal.com)

## SANDISK Sansa e280

★★★★★

£105 inc VAT



The Sansa e280 is one of only two 8GB flash players on test. It's bigger than the iPod Nano, but fits comfortably into a pocket. Battery life is impressive at 18 hours, 17 minutes. However that's still more than nine hours short of the Nano's.

The e280 performed well in our sound quality tests. There was no bass distortion, even when we boosted it. Treble tones seemed harsh on boosted settings at very high volumes, but not to a serious extent.

We were impressed by the speed and stability of the video conversion utility, although some of our converted videos didn't fill the entire screen. The screen itself is clear and is free from graininess.

The e280 has a raised control wheel with buttons surrounding it. It's a little too easy to knock the wheel or an adjacent button while navigating the menus. The interface isn't as polished as others here, and it's easy to accidentally select the wrong menu.

This is the only player in the test to have both internal storage and a slot for microSD cards. The headphones sound good, but are uncomfortable for long periods.

### VERDICT

The Sansa e280 is a reliable MP3 player. It isn't as easy to use as the iPod Nano, but it doesn't suffer from the Nano's audio quality problems. For just £105, it's a surprisingly classy 8GB player.

### SUMMARY

- ✓ Generally good audio quality
- ✓ Good battery life
- ✓ Much cheaper than iPod Nano

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE SDMX4-8192-A70  
SUPPLIER [www.xlshop.co.uk](http://www.xlshop.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.sandisk.com](http://www.sandisk.com)



## FINIS SwiMP3

★★★★★

£108 inc VAT

The SwiMP3 is a unique MP3 player. The manufacturer, Finis, specialises in aquatic equipment, and its player is completely waterproof. It also has some clever features that make underwater listening possible.

To get round the problem of transmitting sound through water, it uses the bones of the skull to conduct sound to the ear. Two speaker pads are held against the cheekbones by the straps of a normal pair of goggles.

The sound it produces under water is fantastically clear. The buttons can be a little stiff, but the player is comfortable and much less unwieldy than waterproof headphones. Our music was still audible through the speaker pads when we came out of the water, but with less clarity.

The SwiMP3 is an extremely specialist device, and the price reflects that. It has a capacity of just 256MB, and a battery life of 8 hours, 39 minutes. However, as you're unlikely to use this player out of the water, that should be sufficient storage and playing time for most swimmers.

Other options are available for underwater audio, such as waterproof cases and headphones, but these tend to be less comfortable to swim with, and have lower sound quality.

### VERDICT

The SwiMP3 is pricy for its capacity, and its battery life is insufficient for extensive use on dry land. However, if you want to listen to music while under water, this is the best player.



### SUMMARY

- ✓ Sounds excellent under water
- ✓ Comfortable when swimming
- ✗ Limited battery and capacity

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 256MB capacity, USB interface  
PART CODE SWIMP3  
SUPPLIER [www.advancedmp3players.co.uk](http://www.advancedmp3players.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.finis.com](http://www.finis.com)

## ARCHOS 204

★★★★★

£119 inc VAT

Unlike most of the MP3 players here, the Archos 204 looks nothing like an iPod.

Instead it's a rather attractive matt-black metal box with a colour screen set in an almost square face.

The controls are very simple, consisting of two buttons and a clickable joystick. While its graphics don't look as polished as those of other players, the menus are easy to navigate, and there's an excellent playlist creator.

Most of the advanced players here have tried to pack as many functions as possible into the case, but the Archos places the emphasis on audio quality. The sound was clear and distortion-free even at the highest volume setting. The default equaliser settings are a little low on bass, but adjusting the five-band custom EQ solved that.

The headphones that come with the 204 are uncomfortable and fit poorly. An additional volume control halfway down their length mostly served to weigh them down and pull them out of our ears.

The 20GB Archos 204 doesn't quite match the iPod's price per gigabyte, and it can't play video, but has the best audio quality of all the hard disk players on test. Unfortunately for a player with so much storage capacity, it did rather poorly in our battery life tests, lasting just under ten-and-a-half hours.

### VERDICT

The Archos 204 has the best audio quality of the hard disk players in this test, but we were disappointed by its battery life. We liked its simplicity, but those who want a range of extra features should look elsewhere.



#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple to use
- ✓ Outstanding audio quality
- ✗ Poor battery life for the price

1.8in HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE 500935  
SUPPLIER [www.pixmania.co.uk](http://www.pixmania.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.archos.com](http://www.archos.com)

## APPLE iPod Nano

★★★★★

£133 inc VAT

It's hard to believe that the iPod Nano's slim case houses 8GB of storage and a battery that lasts more than 27 hours. This black version of Apple's player is one of the best-looking players here, and its menu system and touch-sensitive control wheel are easy to use. The player doesn't appear as a USB or MTP device under Windows, so you have to download the iTunes software before you can transfer music to it.

Like the larger iPod, the iPod Nano distorts even at low volumes if you use a bass-boosting mixer setting. This is particularly noticeable if you upgrade to better headphones, but it's audible even when using the bass-deficient standard headphones. There's no way to create custom equaliser settings, so you're stuck with the rather uninspiring default selection.

The Nano isn't quite as loud as Sandisk's Sansa e280, but it's still capable of a reasonably high volume. Its battery life isn't quite up to that of the Cowon iAudio7, but it is one of the best in this test. Its small screen can display photos and text files, but there's no video capability.

At 4x10cm, this is the smallest high-capacity flash player we've tested. Design and build quality are excellent, and its metal shell feels robust.

### VERDICT

The iPod Nano is more stylish than Cowon's iAudio7 and less expensive than Sony's 8GB NW-A808. However, the tendency for the bass to distort when you boost it is a problem. The headphones are poor, and some users may object to being tied to iTunes.



#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Good default audio quality
- ✓ Well designed
- ✗ Bass boost causes distortion

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE MA497LLA  
SUPPLIER [www.microdirect.co.uk](http://www.microdirect.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)

## TREKSTOR VibeZ

★★★

£149 inc VAT

Of the hard disk players on test, the 12GB Trekstore VibeZ has the lowest capacity, yet it costs almost as much as a 30GB iPod. It has a lot to prove.

Unlike the iPod, the VibeZ can't play video. It's smaller than Apple's hard disk player and feels well-built, but its metal and rubber casing is more utilitarian than attractive. We liked the user-replaceable battery, and the Sennheiser headphones are among the best we've seen.

A large rubber control wheel dominates the player's front. This rotates, and can also be clicked in the centre and at the four compass points. We'd prefer more easily distinguishable buttons. The controls are oversensitive and the wheel moves too freely, making delicate motions difficult.

The VibeZ has microphone, and the headphone socket doubles as a line in. There's also an image viewer, although the screen doesn't display dark colours well. The menu system takes some getting used to, but has useful features, such as an alphabetical index and a DJ menu that makes playlists based on the tracks you play most.

There are plenty of equaliser functions, including a five-band EQ. Sadly, the overall volume was too low and the sound somewhat distant, with poor definition at higher frequencies.

### VERDICT

Using this player is made frustrating by oversensitive controls. While it has some nice features, its performance and quality don't justify the price.



#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Robust build quality
- ✗ Mediocre audio quality
- ✗ Expensive

1.8in HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 12GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE VIBEZ12GB  
SUPPLIER [www.advancedmp3players.co.uk](http://www.advancedmp3players.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.trekstor.de](http://www.trekstor.de)

## APPLE iPod

★★★★★

£150 inc VAT

This 30GB iPod is the largest hard disk player here, both in capacity and physical bulk. It's also the only hard disk player on test that plays video files.

Pictures and videos look great on its large, high-resolution screen, with sharp detail and clear colour. Apple doesn't include a tool to convert your videos to its supported formats. You can buy files in an appropriate format from the iTunes store, or convert your existing files using QuickTime Pro or an appropriate freeware program.

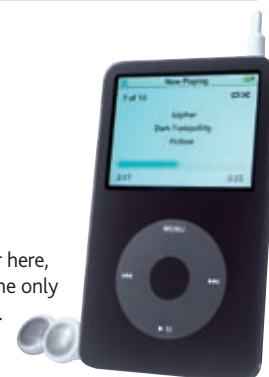
At a flat EQ setting, the sound was clear and sharp, but boosting the bass caused distortion on some tracks, even at low volumes. We were unimpressed by the EQ presets, and there's no way of creating your own.

The iPod's menu system is efficient and easy to navigate, but the sheer number of options can be daunting. The headphones are comfortable, but they sound mediocre and their bass is particularly weak.

The iPod did fairly well in our battery life tests but couldn't equal the performance of the 80GB iPod, which ran for over 20 hours when we tested it in *Shopper* February 2007.

### VERDICT

The 30GB iPod's high capacity and reasonable price make it an excellent choice for a hard disk player. The battery life is pretty good, but the distortion at some EQ settings is disappointing. As with other iPods, you need to install iTunes in order to copy music to the device.



#### SUMMARY

- ✓ Large, high-quality screen
- ✓ Good price per gigabyte
- ✗ Distorts when you boost bass

1.8in HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 30GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface  
PART CODE MA446FB/A  
SUPPLIER [www.think4.com](http://www.think4.com)  
DETAILS [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)



| BUDGET BUY                        |                                    |                             |                                   |                                                                   |                                                            |                         |                                          |                              |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| MANUFACTURER                      | SANDISK                            | MINISTRY OF SOUND           | ALBA                              | CREATIVE                                                          | APPLE                                                      | SWEEX                   | SAMSUNG                                  | IRIVER                       |
| Model                             | Sansa Shaker                       | MOSMP085X10                 | PRDAB210MP3                       | Zen Stone Plus                                                    | iPod Shuffle                                               | Blue Bay 4GB            | YP-T9                                    | S10-2GB                      |
| Rating                            | ★★★★                               | ★                           | ★★★★★                             | ★★★★                                                              | ★★★★★                                                      | ★★★★                    | ★★★★★                                    | ★★                           |
| Headphone rating                  | ★★★★                               | ★★★★                        | ★★                                | ★★★★                                                              | ★★★                                                        | ★★★★                    | ★★★★                                     | ★                            |
| HARDWARE                          |                                    |                             |                                   |                                                                   |                                                            |                         |                                          |                              |
| Capacity (formatted)              | 512MB (483MB)                      | 1GB (950MB)                 | 1GB (876MB)                       | 2GB (1.92GB)                                                      | 1GB (967MB)                                                | 4GB (3.79GB)            | 2GB (1.87GB)                             | 2GB (1.90GB)                 |
| Interface                         | USB                                | USB Hi-Speed                | USB Hi-Speed                      | USB Hi-Speed                                                      | USB Hi-Speed                                               | USB Hi-Speed            | USB Hi-Speed                             | USB Hi-Speed                 |
| Storage medium                    | Flash memory (SD card)             | Flash memory                | Flash memory                      | Flash memory                                                      | Flash memory                                               | Flash memory            | Flash memory                             | Flash memory                 |
| Battery type and charging options | AAA battery                        | Li-ion, USB                 | AA battery                        | Li-ion, USB                                                       | Li-ion, USB                                                | AAA battery             | Li-ion, USB                              | Lithium polymer, USB         |
| Dimensions (WxDxH), weight        | 39.9x71.6x39.9mm, 73.7g            | 43x9.5x94mm, 100g           | 80x27x38mm, 39.3g                 | 55.6x12.8x35.3mm, 21g                                             | 41.2x27.3x10.5mm, 15.5g                                    | 31x23x95mm, 34g         | 42.6x83x11mm, 49 g                       | 42x10.8x39mm, 17.5g          |
| FEATURES                          |                                    |                             |                                   |                                                                   |                                                            |                         |                                          |                              |
| Display                           | None                               | 2in colour TFT              | Four-line mono LCD text display   | Mono LCD                                                          | None                                                       | Mono LCD text display   | 176x220 1.8in colour TFT                 | 128x96 1.15in colour LCD     |
| Expansion slot                    | SD card                            | None                        | None                              | None                                                              | None                                                       | None                    | None                                     | None                         |
| FM radio                          | No                                 | No                          | No                                | Yes                                                               | No                                                         | No                      | Yes                                      | Yes                          |
| Record options                    | None                               | Microphone                  | None                              | Microphone, radio                                                 | None                                                       | Microphone              | Microphone, radio                        | Microphone, radio            |
| Supplied with                     | Headphones, USB cable, AAA battery | Headphones, USB cable       | Headphones, USB cable, AA battery | Headphones, USB cable                                             | Headphones, dock                                           | Headphones, AAA battery | Headphones, USB cable                    | Headphones, USB adaptor      |
| TEST RESULTS                      |                                    |                             |                                   |                                                                   |                                                            |                         |                                          |                              |
| Battery life                      | 9h 54m                             | 9h 56m                      | 25h 6m                            | 6h 57m                                                            | 16h 14m                                                    | 10h 18m                 | 26h 29m                                  | 8h 32m                       |
| 500MB transfer time               | 3m 4s                              | 8m 30s                      | 3m 0s                             | 8m 52s                                                            | 3m 52s                                                     | 14m 30s                 | 8m 8s                                    | 2m 18s                       |
| Supported audio formats           | MP3                                | MP3, WMA, OGG, WAV, WMA-DRM | MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM                 | MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, Audible (with free download from creative.com) | MP3, AAC, Protected AAC, M4A, M4B, M4P, Audible, WAV, AIFF | MP3, WMA, WAV           | MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM                        | MP3, WMA, ASF, OGG           |
| Supported image formats           | None                               | JPG                         | None                              | None                                                              | None                                                       | None                    | JPG                                      | BMP                          |
| Supported video formats           | None                               | AMV                         | None                              | None                                                              | None                                                       | None                    | SVI                                      | None                         |
| Download compatibility            | None                               | Plays For Sure download     | Plays For Sure download           | Plays For Sure subscription and download                          | iTunes                                                     | None                    | Plays For Sure subscription and download | None                         |
| BUYING INFORMATION                |                                    |                             |                                   |                                                                   |                                                            |                         |                                          |                              |
| Price per megabyte                | 5.9p                               | 3.9p                        | 4.1p                              | 2.2p                                                              | 4.5p                                                       | 1.2p                    | 4.1p                                     | 4.3p                         |
| Price                             | £30                                | £40                         | £42                               | £45                                                               | £46                                                        | £50                     | £85                                      | £89                          |
| Warranty duration and terms       | 1 year return to base              | 1 year return to base       | 1 year return to base             | 1 year return to base                                             | 1 year return to base                                      | 1 year return to base   | 1 year return to base                    | 2 years return to base       |
| Supplier                          | www.amazon.co.uk                   | www.argos.co.uk             | www.argos.co.uk                   | www.amazon.co.uk                                                  | www.microdirect.co.uk                                      | Unknown                 | www.pixmania.co.uk                       | www.advancedmp3players.co.uk |
| Details                           | www.sandisk.com                    | www.ministryofsound.co.uk   | www.argos.co.uk                   | uk.europe.creative.com                                            | www.apple.com/uk/                                          | www.sweex.com           | www.samsung.com                          | www.iriver.com               |
| Part Code                         | SDMX9N-512B-A18                    | MOSMP085X10                 | PRDAB210MP3                       | 70PF219100115                                                     | MA949ZT/A                                                  | MP036                   | YP-T9JBQB                                | S10-2GB                      |

| BEST BUY                          |                                                  |                                   |                                          |                              |                                 |                                                             |                                    |                                                             |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| MANUFACTURER                      | SONY                                             | COWON                             | SANDISK                                  | FINIS                        | ARCHOS                          | APPLE                                                       | TREKSTOR                           | APPLE                                                       |
| Model                             | NW-A805 Walkman                                  | iAudio7                           | Sansa e280                               | SwiMP3                       | 204                             | iPod Nano                                                   | VibeZ                              | iPod                                                        |
| Rating                            | ★★★★                                             | ★★★★                              | ★★★★★                                    | ★★★★                         | ★★★★                            | ★★★★                                                        | ★★                                 | ★★★★                                                        |
| Headphone rating                  | ★★★★★                                            | ★★★★                              | ★★                                       | N/A                          | ★★                              | ★★★                                                         | ★★★★                               | ★★★                                                         |
| HARDWARE                          |                                                  |                                   |                                          |                              |                                 |                                                             |                                    |                                                             |
| Capacity (formatted)              | 2GB (1.70GB)                                     | 4GB (3.73GB)                      | 8GB (7.46GB)                             | 256MB (235MB)                | 20.00GB (18.35GB)               | 8GB (7.40GB)                                                | 12GB (11.10GB)                     | 30GB (27.80GB)                                              |
| Interface                         | USB Hi-Speed                                     | USB Hi-Speed                      | USB Hi-Speed                             | USB                          | USB Hi-Speed                    | USB Hi-Speed                                                | USB Hi-Speed                       | USB Hi-Speed                                                |
| Storage medium                    | Flash memory                                     | Flash memory                      | Flash memory                             | Flash memory                 | 1.8in hard disk                 | Flash memory                                                | 1.8in hard disk                    | 1.8in hard disk                                             |
| Battery type and charging options | Li-ion, USB                                      | Lithium polymer, USB              | Li-ion, USB                              | Li-ion, USB                  | Li-ion, USB or optional charger | Li-ion, USB or optional charger                             | Li-ion, USB                        | Li-ion, USB or optional charger                             |
| Dimensions (WxDxH), weight        | 43.8x9.1x88mm, 53g                               | 76.1x19x35.6mm, 60g               | 54x23x98mm, 74g                          | 2x 70x30x10mm 57g            | 5.9x1.7x7.6mm, 119g             | 40x7x99mm, 40g                                              | 105x18x50mm, 71g                   | 61x11x104mm, 136g                                           |
| FEATURES                          |                                                  |                                   |                                          |                              |                                 |                                                             |                                    |                                                             |
| Display                           | 240x320 2in colour LCD                           | 160x128 1.3in colour TFT          | 320x240 1.8in colour TFT                 | None                         | 1.8in colour OLED               | 176x132 1.5in colour screen                                 | 1.8in colour TFT                   | 320x240 2.5in colour LCD screen                             |
| Expansion slot                    | None                                             | None                              | MicroSD                                  | None                         | None                            | None                                                        | None                               | None                                                        |
| FM radio                          | No                                               | Yes                               | Yes                                      | No                           | No                              | No                                                          | No                                 | No                                                          |
| Record options                    | None                                             | Microphone, radio, line-in        | Microphone, radio                        | None                         | None                            | None                                                        | Microphone, line in                | None                                                        |
| Supplied with                     | Headphones, USB cable, headphone extension cable | Headphones, USB cable             | Headphones, USB cable                    | Nothing                      | Headphones, USB cable           | Headphones, USB cable                                       | Headphones, USB cable              | Headphones, USB cable, universal dock adaptor               |
| TEST RESULTS                      |                                                  |                                   |                                          |                              |                                 |                                                             |                                    |                                                             |
| Battery life                      | 23h 1m                                           | 33h 59m                           | 18h 17m                                  | 8h 39m                       | 10h 29m                         | 27h 22m                                                     | 17h 11m                            | 13h 39m                                                     |
| 500MB transfer time               | 7m 21s                                           | Unknown                           | 4m 4s                                    | 10m 35s                      | 3m 5s                           | 1m 55s                                                      | 2m 42s                             | 1m 17s                                                      |
| Supported audio formats           | ATRAC (AAC, MP3 and WMA converted)               | MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, OGG, FLAC, WAV | MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM                        | MP3                          | MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, WAV          | MP3, AAC, Protected AAC, Audible, Apple Lossless, WAV, AIFF | MP3, WMA, WAV, OGG, FLAC, WMA-DRM9 | MP3, AAC, Protected AAC, Audible, Apple Lossless, WAV, AIFF |
| Supported image formats           | JPG                                              | JPG                               | JPG, BMP                                 | None                         | JPG                             | JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIFF, PSD, PNG                              | JPG                                | JPG, BMP, GIF, TIFF, PSD, PNG                               |
| Supported video formats           | MPEG4 (MP4, M4V)                                 | MPEG4                             | MOV                                      | None                         | None                            | None                                                        | None                               | H.264 and MPEG4 video in M4V, MP4, and MOV formats          |
| Download compatibility            | SonyConnect Store                                | Plays For Sure download           | Plays For Sure subscription and download | None                         | Plays For Sure download         | iTunes                                                      | Plays For Sure download            | iTunes                                                      |
| BUYING INFORMATION                |                                                  |                                   |                                          |                              |                                 |                                                             |                                    |                                                             |
| Price per megabyte                | 4.4p                                             | 2.4p                              | 1.3p                                     | 42.2p                        | 0.6p                            | 1.6p                                                        | 1.2p                               | 0.5p                                                        |
| Price                             | £90                                              | £100                              | £106                                     | £108                         | £119                            | £133                                                        | £149                               | £150                                                        |
| Warranty duration and terms       | 1 year return to base                            | 1 year return to base             | 1 year return to base                    | 1 year return to base        | 1 year return to base           | 1 year return to base                                       | 1 year return to base              | 1 year return to base                                       |
| Supplier                          | www.play.com                                     | www.advancedmp3players.co.uk      | www.xlshop.co.uk                         | www.advancedmp3players.co.uk | www.pixmania.co.uk              | www.microdirect.co.uk                                       | www.advancedmp3players.co.uk       | www.think4.com                                              |
| Details                           | www.sony.co.uk                                   | www.cowonglobal.com               | www.sandisk.com                          | www.finis.com                | www.archos.com                  | www.apple.com                                               | www.trekstor.de                    | www.apple.com                                               |
| Part Code                         | NW-A805/PC                                       | IAUDIOI74GB                       | SDMX4-8192-A70                           | SWIMP3                       | 500935                          | MA497LLA                                                    | VIBEZ12GB                          | MA446FB/A                                                   |

Labs verdict MP3 Players

Almost all the players in this test sound good, but headphones, features and battery lives varied.

If you want to store 20 or so albums the iPod Shuffle is tempting. Alba's PRDAB210MP3 does much more for £4 less, though, and impressed us with its DAB radio and incredible battery life.

If you want to store your entire music collection, you need a hard disk-based player. The Archos 204 has the best audio quality, although the iPod is a good alternative if you use iTunes.

The best products sit somewhere between these extremes. Samsung's YP-T9 has excellent audio quality, great looks and a brilliant interface. It's one of the more expensive 2GB players, but still a Best Buy. Finally, if you want to carry just enough music never to get bored of it all, an 8GB player is perfect. The iPod Nano dominates this market, but we prefer Sandisk's e280. It costs £27 less and has a superior screen and sound quality – another Best Buy. **ES**

**ALBA**  
**PRDAB210MP3**  
★★★★★

**SAMSUNG**  
**YP-T9**  
★★★★★

**SANDISK**  
**Sansa e280**  
★★★★★



NOVEMBER 2007 • COMPUTER SHOPPER

111